

# MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society

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## REPORT

Report 25

March-April, 1979

## Focus on Women and Power

Women and Power is not an easy subject to think about. As one woman said when we discussed it, "Men have power; women don't. What more is there to say?"

But there is much more to say. There is power that makes things happen. There is power that keeps things from happening. There is power that seeks the good of those over whom it is exercised. There is power that is wielded to benefit the one in power and it is sometimes hard to distinguish the two. There are situations in which power is exercised autocratically, tightly held by one person. There are situations in which power is shared by many persons, more a matter of function than of person or position.

There is power that is acknowledged both by those who wield it and those over whom it is wielded. And there is power that operates behind the scenes, sometimes privately recognized by both parties and sometimes not.

An article in the Chicago Sun-Times featuring powerful women in Illinois contrasted what the writer saw as the difference between the attitude of men and women toward power. "When you ask men about power they can wax rhapsodic . . . power is delicious." "Power is sexy; it feels good; it needn't corrupt. It's impotence that corrupts." Women, on the other hand, "back away from all that ecstasy." They describe power as impact, persuasion, influence, responsibility. "That's because they have been conditioned to think of power as tough and masculine."

Some time ago I was in a group that was given the task of identifying powerful women in our community. As we worked on this task I realized how little I understood about how decisions are made in the community, how power is often more or less than it appears on the surface and how the power struggles within government, industry, the health and educational establishments, to mention a few, reflect the interplay between the many facets and types of power.

We identified women who have power within a limited sphere, such as a department within an institution, by virtue of capability or longevity; women who exercise power at someone else's discretion as long as they are willing to follow the rules; women who exercise power by virtue of being married to a wealthy or powerful man; women who exercise power by cultivating contacts with persons whose knowledge, wealth or ability to reward and punish give them power; and those who wield power

by boldly using the authority of an office to the fullest extent possible, daring to challenge the establishment, and because of a certain charisma and popular support, getting away with it.

One of the myths of our culture is that women are passive, not suited to assertively making things happen or exercising control. But it is clear that there are many strong women who do possess power, though that power is very often unacknowledged and exercised behind the scenes. Because it is not recognized it does nothing to dispel the myth that power cannot be capably exercise by women, and women themselves continue to believe the myth. Furthermore, though it is not always the case, unacknowledged power can be manipulative and unhealthy. The "successful woman behind the successful man," denied the legitimate exercise of her own talents, uses her man to accomplish her goals. Because her power is unrecognized, she is not accountable and therefore potentially dangerous. That is one way that impotence corrupts.

Another observation on women in power is that persons who feel powerless often exercise the little power they have in a tyrannical way. There are well-known stereotypes of the woman as a shrewish and arbitrary boss in a work situation, or the woman who browbeats her husband and runs her children's lives, abusing her power in the limited area in which she exercises it. These stereotypes may sometimes be accurate; often they are not. Because power is not associated with femininity as it is with masculinity, women are less likely to use power as confirmation of their sexual identity and may be more comfortable with sharing it.

All of us had our first experience with power in the family in which we were raised. The significance of that first encounter in shaping our attitudes about power, our response to it, and the way we exercise it, is crucial. The parent-child relationship begins completely unequally. One adult, with far greater knowledge, strength, resources and great capacity to reward and punish, exercises almost complete control over a tiny being who is totally dependent on the parent for life itself and knows nothing of the world. One of the most important tasks of that unequal relationship is, within the space of 18-20 years, to change the balance of power so that there are two equal adults with the formerly dependent one capable not only of taking responsibility for her own life but also of caring for and exercising power over other dependent persons. Raising a child means exercising power wisely in the child's behalf in such a way that she can learn to exercise it herself. The parent must be able to give up power gradually in the amount that the child is able to assume for herself. It is a difficult task because the balance of power is constantly changing, and both parties are often ambivalent about the degree to which they want to happen. But the factors which make for power do change inevitably as the child's size and knowledge increases, and the parent's capacity to reward and punish and control the child's access to resources correspondingly decrease.

When the parent does not give up power willingly, as is often the case, a host of problems result. Many parents, especially fathers, believe that giving up power is a sign of weakness. In many families, the power relationship between mother and father is unequal. Both of these factors complicate the process of changing the balance of power in the family. One reason that democracy does not function as well as it might in our society and persons with power often use it to exploit and oppress is that, growing up in authoritarian families where power is not shared, many persons primary experience with power is that it is used to coerce. As we try to understand power we would do well to give more attention to it as a dynamic of the parent-child relationship.

The contributors to this Report look at women and power in light of Jesus' call to self-sacrificial servanthood and in relation to the advent stories, as well as attempt to formulate some of the questions that the experiences of power and powerlessness raise for Anabaptist Christian feminists. We would welcome letters and short articles helping us further define and respond to these questions.

*Janet Umble Reedy, Goshen, IN, who wrote the above article and solicited material for this issue, is a member of the MCC Peace Section.*

## Power as Positive Authority by Sue Schantz

The assignment: "Write an article about men, women and power, especially pushing out the power aspect." I immediately said yes and then shrank back upon further reflection. The power theme is so broad, where do I start? I felt ill-equipped to do a sociological analysis of power dynamics. Another fear was that if I were to delineate the patriarchal patterns or male uses of power that are prevalent in our culture, including church institutions, I could easily become angry and resentful. At the same time, I'd have to acknowledge my own involvement in power plays in terms of manipulating others to get what I want, and in counter-acting the forces that would control and mold me into someone or something that I would resist being. Perhaps the greatest discomfort I felt was with this thought: People reading this article will likely want to see concrete suggestions for combatting the male-dominated leadership in the church, or somehow using power to get women into leadership positions. How do I reconcile that with my understanding of the biblical injunction for self-sacrificing servanthood and submission?

The problem for me was mostly one of power definition, both culturally and biblically. I tend to associate power with an oppressive domination and control which crushes the dignity of others. Although in the early history of humanity women were powerful as inventors of pottery, weaving and agriculture, institutional hierarchies developed as male and the powerlessness of women was reflected in their exclusion from public life. The predominant model of power from history confirms Lord Acton's 19th century pronouncements: "Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely." Women are most often seen as powerless victims, but have not been exempt from manipulative control over others, particularly through the power of denial. On the other hand, women have used power with positive effects. Even within the limits of the authoritarian Nazi regime, women exercised a certain amount of power in that their attitudes toward employment practices led to state hesitation to enforce labor conscription systematically.

Still, that is power in the sense of control over others. Another approach is to see power as an inner source of strength, as the individual ability to do or effect something. Jesus provides the model for power as a positive authority given to those who are obedient to God's will for human servanthood. It takes a re-orientation for me to see power as a positive, God-given quality in my possession which can unleash creative potential and can be an ability to effect changes which move myself and others toward our original status in God's creation as equal, complementary, communal, mutually submissive male and female partners with shared dominion over the rest of creation.

That vision of our original status pictures the ideal of cooperative mutuality, toward which those believing in the resurrection as a transforming power, bringing dignity to all, must work. I would hold that although the goal is communal

cooperation, it is not inappropriate to recall that women, who have felt and seen themselves as powerless for so long need to start with a personal awakening. This involves moving from fragmentation, which is not power, to wholeness, which is power, a power emanating from the synthesis of body, mind and spirit, through the indwelling Holy Spirit. It involves revaluing as strengths our learned traits of caretaking, nurturing and serving, because true power is compassion in the sense of nurturing, loving and parenting rather than in being forceful, controlling or violent. Wholeness is also the interplay of male and female principles, but both women and men need to replace the masculine practice of power through subjugation with a self-actualized power that is energy-producing, which remembers our spiritual roots, and which is a warm, nurturant intelligent wisdom that can transform the world.

But we all need to go beyond claiming personal wholeness through Christ to developing conscious strategies for implementing male and female equality. We need to learn together how to relate in terms of mutuality, deference, assertiveness, accountability, and servantness. We need to learn how to "stand each other" --to recognize that male and female authority may be different but that these differences should be respected in the body of Christ, and that all should participate in decision-making. And finally, women especially need to "Listen to the Spirit and take every opportunity she gives you." (Josephine M. Ford)

*Sue Schantz is a student at AMBS.*

## Mary, Elizabeth, and Power by Earl Sears

Some interesting questions arise when one looks again at the advent stories in Luke and Matthew. I do not understand the full dimensions of these events but let me raise what are to me interesting possibilities.

At the writing of these words of Luke and Matthew, power, influence and position were carried by the men of society. Lineage, for example, was carried by men. Jesus' descent from David came through Joseph not Mary. Zachariah was the priest who performed the sacred duties, not Elizabeth, even though she too was of the priestly line. In other words, men were primary, women secondary.

This being the case, it is very interesting that in the first chapters of Luke and Matthew it is the reverse. Elizabeth is old and barren. To be a woman, to be old, to be barren was as socially powerless as you could get. Zachariah, while he was old, was called upon to celebrate the offering of incense at the heart of the temple, the seat of religious power and influence. Here the angel of the Lord appeared to tell him that a son would be born. Zachariah refused to believe and so became dumb; he was to keep his mouth shut for the duration! Elizabeth, the powerless one, carried the conversation, the wisdom, from then until the day of the circumcision of John. Here when the naming is to take place, the usual custom was to name the son after the father, but it is Elizabeth who refuses. By this refusal, Elizabeth facilitates the opening of Zachariah's mouth, for after her refusal they go to Zachariah to gain his opinion. He confirms what Elizabeth has said and his tongue is loosed.

In the story of Joseph and Mary, it is the virgin Mary who responds to a visit from the angel Gabriel. A young girl, a virgin, represented innocence and wordly powerlessness. Mary is amazed and mystified but with the news that Elizabeth also



was to bear a son, she goes to Elizabeth, for Mary has believed the angel's statement that with God "nothing is impossible." A leveler of the proud and arrogant and dethroner of the high and mighty is taking place in her womb!

Joseph responds with usual manly wisdom. When he hears the news, he will do the decent thing and divorce Mary quietly, making little fuss about it, according to Matthew. In Luke Joseph is seldom mentioned.

Luke's stories remind us of the historical beginnings (creation) of old Israel and may have been chosen for this reason. Further, if you are going to talk about birth, women ought to be significantly involved! But it seems more than just historical or natural accident that these stories are told in the way that they are. Surely they say something to indicate that when God does a new thing He is not dependent upon this world's mighty, powerful and socially acceptable. Perhaps it is no accident that women are more responsive than the men of these stories. Is there possibly a hint that they may be ultimately more powerful, where it counts, in their greater openness to God's truth and wisdom?

It is possible we are in danger of reading insights into these stories that the original writers did not intend to convey; but surely foundation (creation) stories of Christianity that make secondary men, who are traditionally primary in society, and primary women, who are traditionally secondary, are telling us something. This teaching may be telling us that God works in ways that often turn our usual vision of power inside out. It may further tell us something about a sensitivity and ability to respond to God's inside-out ways that are portrayed here by Elizabeth and Mary, but are available to anyone, men and women, if we can get beyond our old visions and stereotypes.

This leaves me with a question. Is it possible that the power of Elizabeth and Mary still needs to be taught to those who "think like men" by those who "think like women?" In an article, "Women Executives in the Old-Boy Network," which appeared in The Managerial Woman, by Margaret Henning and Anne Jordim, there is an attempt to help women adapt to the masculine style in "top levels of management." One of the examples is the case of "Donna," who could not understand why her boss (a man) tolerated another man who was simply incompetent and non-productive. The lesson, according to Henning and Jordim, that Donna needed to learn was that you do not risk your present and future advancement for the ideal of having competent, productive workers. In the man's corporate world you tolerate incompetence and shady work for your own survival.

Of course, Henning and Jordim are right if you want to make it in a man's corporate world. In light of our Elizabeth and Mary stories, however, they are really saying you must become more like Zachariah and Joseph since this is how it is. Perhaps, for those of us who care about something beyond the "corporate world," we need more persons to remind us that Elizabeth and Mary are the ones who carry real wisdom in God's world. To take the Zachariah and Joseph position is to leave us without birth and new creation.

*Earl Sears is the teacher, one member of a three-member leadership team, for the Southside Fellowship in Elkhart, Indiana.*

# Experience and Information: Two Essentials

by Dorothy Yoder Nyce

Two simple definitions of power: 1) by Jean Baker Miller, M.D. - "the capacity to implement," 2) by churchman Harold Bauman - "being able to do something." Both refer to ability and action. Neither sounds harmful, yet most of us think negative when we hear the word power. Experience has shown that it is frequently achieved for one at the expense of another.

As we women develop more skills and take direct action in more diverse settings, I would genuinely value our serious discussion of ideas and questions like these:

- Experience and information are the two main essentials that distinguish people with and without power. Is not then the comparable distribution of these two our prime task? How can those with access to these two be convinced--be secure "enough"--to value making available space, opportunity, and resources to others less experienced and informed?
- Where have we been actively exerting power--individually and collectively? Has this been at the expense of others?
- Does our experience with powerlessness provide insight for creative, healthy assumption of power that avoids depriving others opportunity for action?
- Can power be accomplished mutually or cooperatively?
- What models of action in the history of human civilization have most nearly avoided suppression, slander, destruction of differing experience or tradition?
- Are we committed to be leaders who interchange as followers, having so effectively achieved the goal of leading--assisting others to act and making one's role unnecessary?
- Why are we so quick to reject, rather than support, each other? Why do we confuse another woman's achievement as rejection of our own?
- Eileen Worley has stated, "What is really required if women are to be able to think and talk freely is that they develop some independent internal sources of self-esteem." What is your response?
- How can convincing (and confrontive if necessary) interchange between women and men be achieved that insures growth for each? This is particularly problematic when men have been conditioned to assume that women are not "qualified" to counter them, meaning they are not skilled in clear explanation.

Reading and reflective thought on power are essential. Now who is ready to join in discussing and further implementing the issues? Should a conference be arranged to attempt it?

*Dorothy Yoder Nyce, Goshen, Indiana, is editing a packet of articles on women to be published by the Task Force for Mennonite constituency use.*

## Related Resources

### Books and Articles

- Christ, Carol P. "Heretics and Outsiders: The Struggle Over Female Power in Western Religion," Soundings (Fall, 1978).
- Cosby, Gordon. "A Sermon on Power and Servanthood," Post-American (June-July 1977).
- Gornick, Vivian and Barbara K. Moran, ed. Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness. New York: Mentor Books, 1971.
- Hammer, Signe. "When Women Have Power Over Women," Ms. (September 1978).
- Howe, Florence, ed. Women and the Power to Change (especially an article of that title by the editor). (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975).
- Miller, Jean Baker. Toward a New Psychology of Women. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.
- Mollenkott, Virginia. "Feminism and the Kingdom . . .," Sojourners (June 1977).
- \_\_\_\_\_. Women, Men and the Bible. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1977.
- Riddle, Dorothy. "New Visions of Spiritual Power," Quest (Spring 1975).
- Saikowski, Charlotte. "Tenderness in the Board Room?" The Christian Science Monitor (Friday, October 20, 1978), p. 17.
- Tillich, Paul. Love, Power and Justice. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- "View Point: Power and Powerlessness," Signs (Autumn 1975).

### Films

- Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman. 58 min. Features Antonia Brico, a 73-year-old woman, who seeks, in the face of discrimination, the opportunity to lead a major symphony orchestra.
- Childhood: The Enchanted Years. 52 min. Studies the child's early years, watching his progress from complete dependency to a self-determined will.
- Union Maids. 49 min. Three women, labor organizers in the 1930's tell what it meant for a woman to be active in the work world of that time.
- Women on the March: The Struggle for Equal Rights. 60 min. Discusses the fight for the franchise in England, Canada, and the U.S. Deals with the status of women after World War I and records their achievements in many fields.

*The above films are available free to Kansas groups from the Wichita Public Library. Others--check your local libraries for information.*

## News

Poetry, prayers, cartoons or pithy paragraphs that reflect the experience of women (in general or in the church) or that attempt to use language in creative, nonsexist ways are being solicited for the new packet of material on women that is being compiled for Mennonite constituency use by the Task Force on Women. This packet is intended to build on and move beyond the "Persons Becoming" packet published in 1972. Send your work as well as topic and writer suggestions to Dorothy Yoder Nyce, Editor; 1603 S. 15th St., Goshen, IN 46526.

"The Friday Night Massacre," a helpful report and interpretation of the details and events surrounding the "resignation" of Bella Abzug appeared in The Nation, February 3, 1979. The article stimulated Hubert Schwartzentruber, Associate Secretary of the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, to think again about the structural relation of women to decision-making in the Mennonite Church. What role might a board such as Congregational Ministries play in moving the church toward more equal representation on all decision-making boards and in staff positions? I'm sure Hubert would welcome conversation on this.

Black Male-Female Identity in Struggle, a set of four papers on the Afro-American family is available for approximately \$2.75 from the Inter-denominational Theological Center, 671 Beckwith St., S.W., Atlanta, GA 30314. The booklet includes papers on "The Attitude of the Black Male Toward His Black Woman: A Carry Over From Slavery?" "The Role of the Black Church in the Development of Contemporary Black Male-Female Relationships," "The Black Church's Role in the Fostering of a Positive Black Male Image," and "Black Consciousness and a New Value System in Black Male-Female Relationships."

## Verbs

Marj Geissinger, Zionsville, Pennsylvania, was invited to debate "Women in the Church" with Charles Svendsen at Zion Church, Souderton, Pennsylvania, on January 16.

Our Struggle to Serve, a new book edited by Virginia Hearn (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1979, \$7.95 U.S.), includes chapters by Lareta Halteman Finger, who grew up in a Mennonite home in Pennsylvania, Lorraine Peters, whose family attended a Mennonite Brethren church in Saskatchewan, Ruth A. Schmidt whose parents were of Mennonite background, Katie Funk Wiebe--a Mennonite Brethren writer from Hillsboro, Kansas, and Joyce Shutt, a General Conference Mennonite woman from Fairfield, Pennsylvania. The book, subtitled "The Stories of 15 Evangelical Women," is a collection of autobiographical sketches--stories of women who refused to be bound by prevailing cultural and religious expectations for women and struggled to find creative ways to overcome "second-class citizenship in the kingdom of God." The variety of struggles (from that of Virginia Mollenkott whose husband had frequently warned her that "he could tell God not to listen to my prayers, and God would cut me off" to Anne Eggebroten who designed a marriage contract with her spouse to help protect them from the oppressive roles forces on wives and husbands) provides opportunity for many women in the



church to find at least one story which reminds them of their own. Although not all the material is new (Katie Funk Wiebe's story is a reprint from her earlier book Alone: A Widow's Search for Joy), the collection is highly recommended for church libraries. People who would find the book most useful would likely include 1) Christian men and women who are beginning to be concerned about the meaning of the gospel for women but who cannot yet articulate or see clearly the concrete everyday aspects (or the passion behind) the problems Christian women face in church and society, 2) women struggling with the question of their identity in relation to their husband, children and possible career, 3) those who are puzzled about how to hold together deep Christian commitment and identification with many of the concerns raised by "secular" feminists.

## Letters

Dear Gayle:

*With freedom comes risks! Anyone who gets a taste of freedom - in any area of life - cannot endure the old confining ways which once robbed them. However, in every area of new-found freedom there is the sinful tendency to then make that freedom a new-found god. So that rather than saying with David, "One thing I have desired of the Lord and that is to dwell in His presence . . .", we say, "One thing I have desired of the Lord and that is freedom from male domination." No, I do not believe the two are synonymous.*

*In Report 23, December 1978, your front-page article has a somewhat misleading title: "Focus on Family Violence". It appears from the article that only men are the violent ones. From the article, I get the impression that to be male one must be a grotesque giant who holds a barbed club high above his head waiting for the poor woman to lift her face from the dust.*

*I have several questions: Are all women pure, holy and undefiled? Are there not any nagging, discontent, immature, bitchy women in this world? Why must a change in the status of women come only via the women rising up and accusing the male of chauvinism and asserting themselves? (Always with the risk of sinning with actions and words.) Is it possible that women are bound - not by men - but by things much more subtle and intangible. Things like love of the false gods of materialism, covetousness, discontent, peer pressure, secularism and pride.*

*I'm not sure just who this task force is serving. Is it serving the down-trodden woman? Is it serving the liberated woman? Or is this task force the means of release for a number of women who are disgruntled with their past lives? The greatest liberator is Jesus Christ. Being rightly related to Him frees us from the bondage of a false notion of freedom.*

*It is my personal opinion that perhaps this task force should disband for the benefit of all concerned. Could the women have a task force which would encourage us to seriously consider the claims of Christ in every*

area of our life? Is it too much to ask that women be excited about biblical principles so that when reaching out into the world we truly represent Christ and are not just waving a flag from our own bandwagon? If our outlook on male-female relationships is not biblical then we ought to lay our cards out on the table and call ourselves what we are - secular humanists.

Sincerely,

*Kathryn M. Hunsberger*

Kathryn M. Hunsberger  
452 Fairmont Ave.  
Meadville, PA 16335

## Announcing...

### NEW MEN/NEW ROLES CONFERENCE

From 15-17 June a conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, will zero in on the theme "New Men/New Roles in Light of the Gospel." The purpose of the conference, to be convened at Mennonite Brethren Bible College, is to bring together men and women to explore the implications of the gospel for sex roles, to examine society's expectations of men and their consequences, and to suggest strategies to eradicate sexism in its personal and institutional forms.

The program begins Friday evening and continues until Sunday noon. Among the resource persons are George Lakey, sociologist, Quaker, and former civil rights activist, now involved in the Movement for a New Society, which creates alternatives and strategies for change; Norman Walsh, coordinator of the Canadian Friends Service Committee, and film producer currently working on a documentary on men and masculinity; Bryan Teixeira, a Catholic teaching at the Pastoral Institute in British Columbia; Elizabeth and Perry Yoder, authors of a book on men's roles --Elizabeth is general editor for the Commission on Education of the General Conference Mennonite Church; Perry teaches Bible at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas.

To facilitate attendance by married couples a children's program is planned as well as a day-care center for little children. For detailed information on the program, cost, and accomodations, write to Kathy Froese, #15-348 Assiniboine, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 0Y1.

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The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church And Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

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